

# 'Green prescribing' for refugees and asylum seekers

Contexts, Perspectives and Reasons Why



Clare Rishbeth, University of Sheffield



# #refugeeswelcome *in parks*

Is all about

- how managers of urban greenspace can better support refugee visitors,
- and how refugee support organisations can utilise access to urban greenspace as a resource.

Our primary focus is on national organisations in the UK, but we are also learning from and working with our partners in Berlin, and local stakeholder groups in East London and Sheffield.

## What we are doing

- Understanding refugee experience of public spaces and parks: **16 interviews with refugees** (London, Sheffield, Berlin)
- Scoping the current state of policy and practice relating to refugees and use of urban public open space: **interviews with 35 stakeholders** in greenspace sector, refugee support, community cohesion and wellbeing (London, Sheffield, Berlin and UK National).
- Curating a resource of good practice case studies from across Northern Europe.
- Instigating pilot initiatives to facilitate cross-sector collaborations.



Amongst all the challenges that refugees and asylum seekers face: why is the ability to access and enjoy parks (urban public space) important for wellbeing?



State of trauma, post trauma,  
on-going challenges

Dis-orientated

Lonely

Barriers to participating in  
everyday activities

Vulnerable to crime or  
exploitation

“I like to see people happy. When we sit in the park we say ‘hello’ to people. When we see someone with an Arabic face we talk to them, but we talk to anyone if they can understand our English”.  
Adnan. Syrian/London.

Seeking respite, calm, or at least distraction

Needing (and able) to adapt

Looking for or needing to find new social connections

Skills and experience to offer

Requiring some support

## The value of being outdoors

“The difference between indoors and outdoors is that I prefer the outdoors because I am able to let the negative energy out when I am outside. Indoors I am stressed and feel more pressure”

Rasha (Syrian/Berlin)

**NATURE & EMOTIONAL HEALTH**  
Benefits to our wellbeing

Time in nature

Reduces	Increases
Depression	Meditative feelings
Stress	Good mood
Anxiety	Empathy
Rumination	Attention & focus

**USING NATURE AS AN EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM**

WHILE RESEARCH SHOWS A REDUCTION IN STRESS LEVELS AND AN INCREASE IN RELAXATION, SPENDING TIME IN NATURE HAS ADDITIONAL SOCIAL & HEALTH BENEFITS

ACTIVITY IN GREEN SPACES REDUCES SOCIAL ISOLATION AND INCREASES A SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONNECTION TO PEOPLE AND PLACE

A 90 minute walk in nature...  
reduces negative self talk

10 minutes in a green space...  
increases meditative responses in the brain

Looking at natural scenery...  
Triggers areas of the brain associated with empathy & love

WWW.WILDINTHECITY.ORG.UK  
@wildinthecity1

## Trips to the countryside/coast

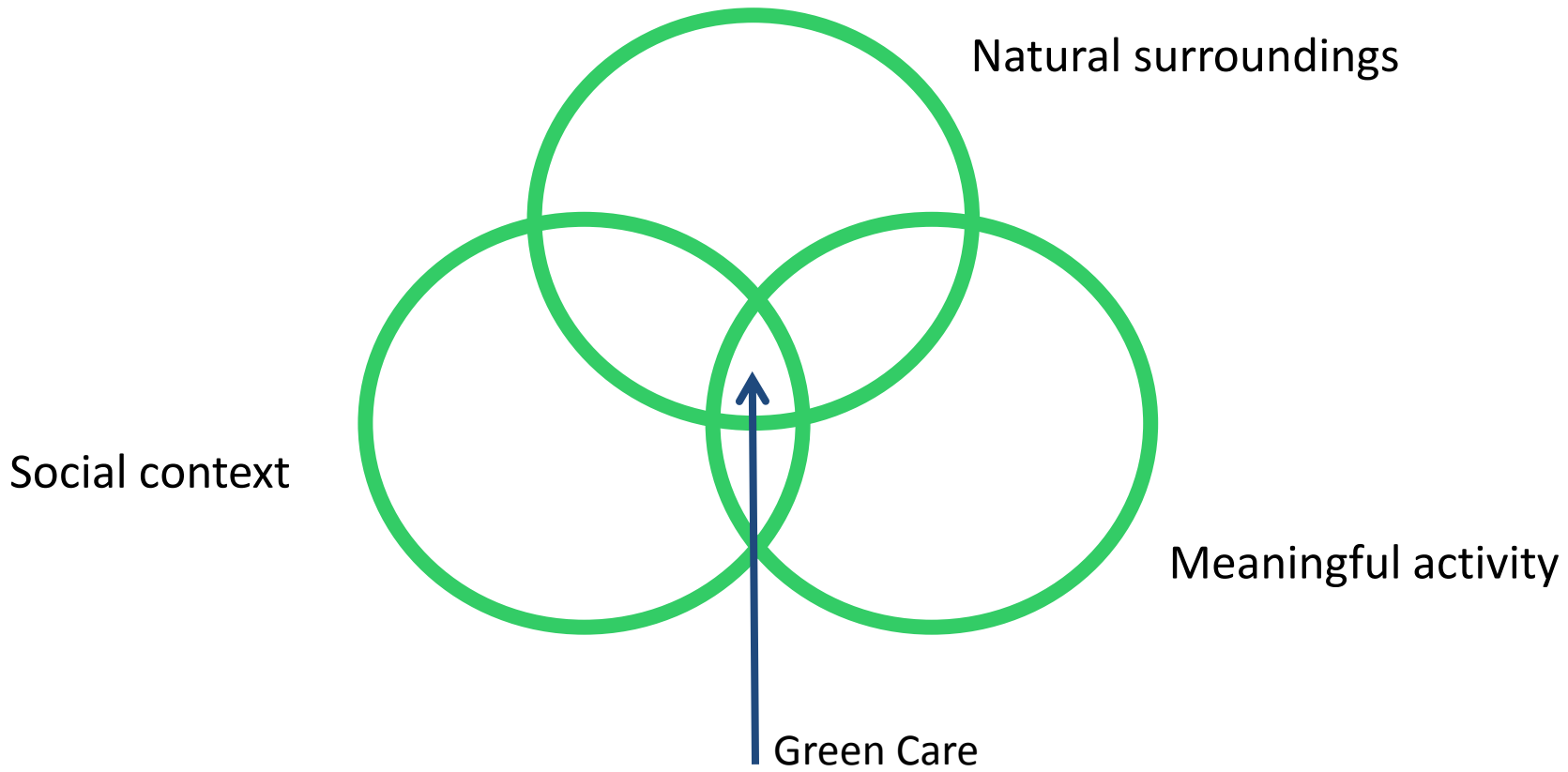
“Once we see the sea, we cheer up immediately, we don’t think about any of our troubles... but as soon as we come back, our troubles return”.

Lotanna (Nigerian/London)

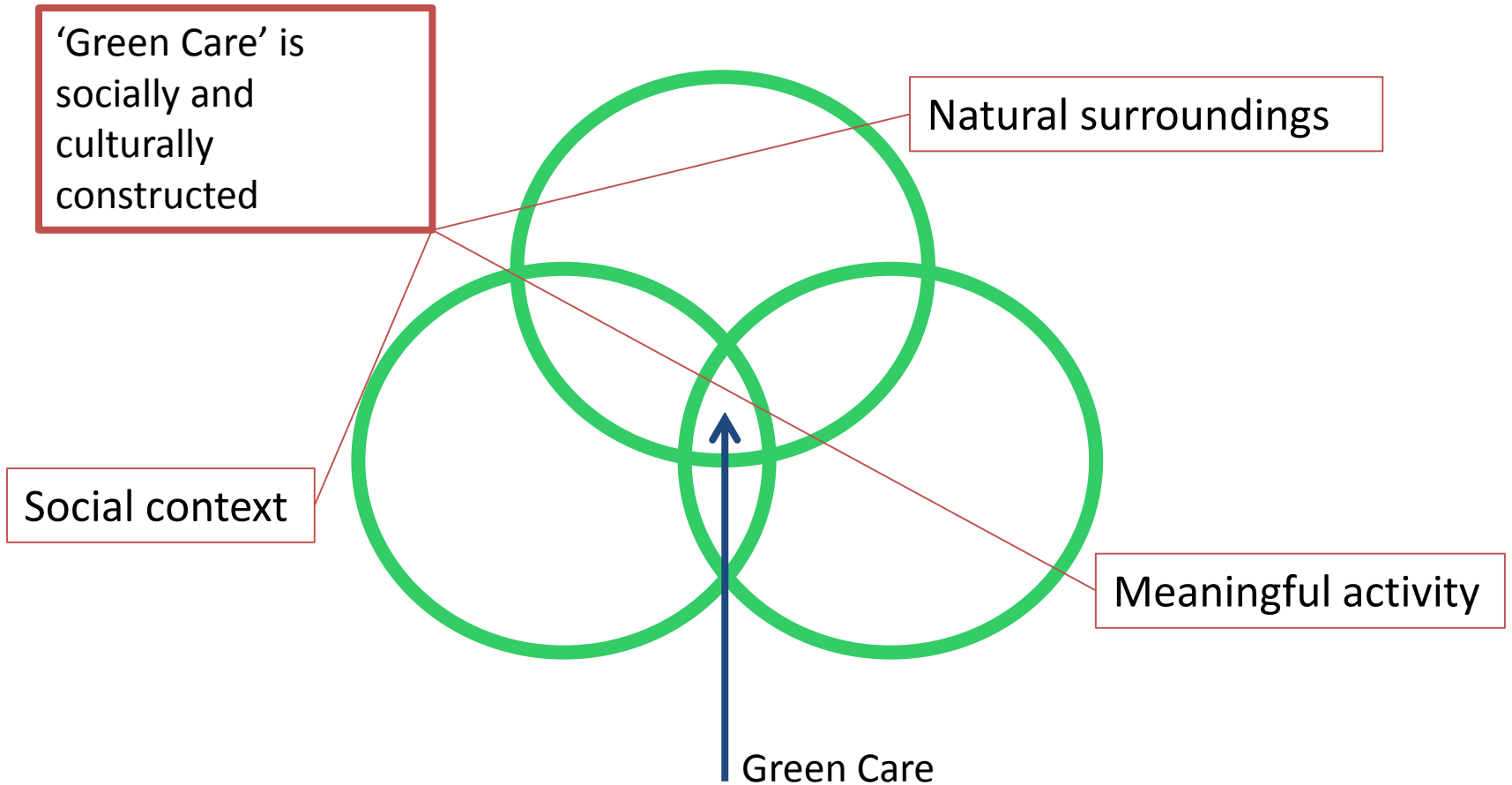
## Being outside with others

“when the weather is super-nice I put off all other responsibilities and take the kids outside!”

Najwa (Palestinian/Berlin).







# FIND

How refugees and asylum seekers understand the culture and diversity of parks, and research what information they need before visiting.

- Many refugees and asylum seekers will find the types and range of greenspace in the UK unfamiliar.
- 'orientation programmes' vary immensely in scope, often focus on absolute essentials rather than the wider resource of the local area.

## What helps

- Better orientation including cultures and variety of open space use.
- Peer-to-peer sharing of information
- Integrated web-based info (especially google maps)

# CHAT

How the confidence needed to visit parks is easier to find when you are with a friend or a facilitated group.

- “Venturing out is stressful”
- Many asylum seekers and refugees very isolated.
- Experience or knowledge of racial harassment.

## What helps

- The change to spend time outside with a friend or in a group context.
- Parks that make ‘hanging out’ easy and normal: comfortable, people watching, facilities and activities.
- ‘Curated sociably’. Refugee and asylum seeker groups doing things outside.

# JOIN IN

The potential of parks and public open spaces to offer a range of (mostly free) activities to help combat boredom and give a sense of purpose.

- Asylum seekers often talk about ‘the limbo’ – lives on hold, and combination of stress and boredom.
- Contemplation not always welcome, some places are too quiet.

‘I would see no purpose in going [to parks] on my own, but from a moment where my friend introduced me to running, I take part in park running classes regularly’ Firuz (Iranian, Sheffield)

## What helps

- The ability to find ‘your own niche’, something you can be good at – respite comes in many forms.
- Sport, growing projects, walking groups, volunteers. A sense of routine and purpose as well as distraction.
- Everyday participation: parks where you can easily be part of the scene (playgrounds).

# FEEL BETTER

The ways in which spending time in parks and other natural environments can improve mental health.



- “I am depressed and take anti-depression drugs [...] My mood here is different, in Iran I was very happy. Maybe my mood will change if I can work, go to university and can contribute to society”. Hozan (Kurdish/Bradford).
- When people are at points of crisis, the demands and uncertainties of being outside (and ‘fitting in’) can be too much.

## What helps

- Being in parks with natural elements (lakes, trees) and feeling calmer.
- Spending time with friends in lively places like urban squares.
- Respite in supported locations like gardening projects (Gardens of Sanctuary).

# Increase autonomy

maps, apps  
web-based info  
signs

befriending  
volunteering  
peer-to-peer  
orientation  
programmes

running groups  
walking groups  
excursions  
informal sport  
picnics  
using the playground

autonomy

use and  
build  
healthy  
social  
networks

use and build  
healthy social  
connections

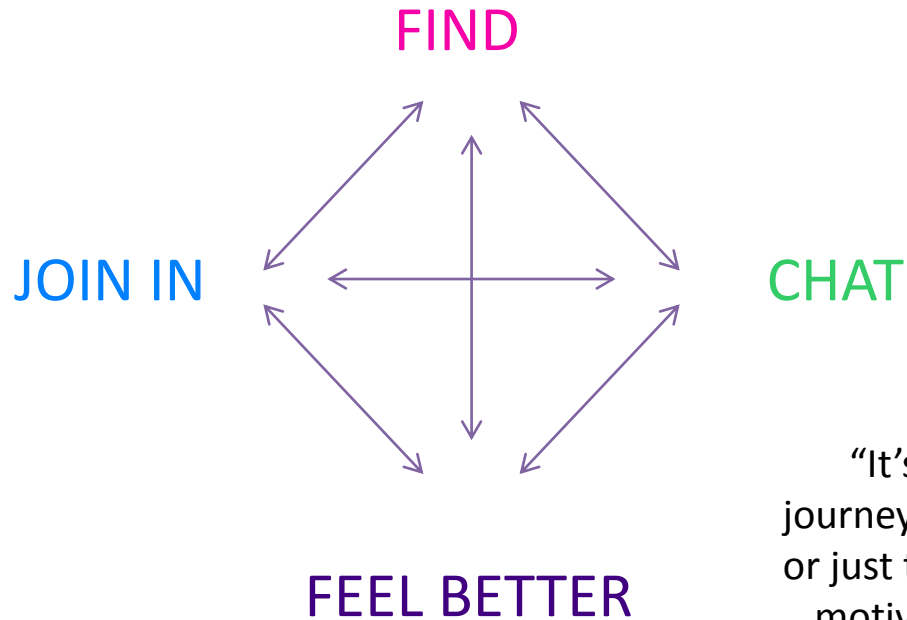
respite

meditation

gardening  
projects  
organised sport  
outdoor activities: art, games  
nature study

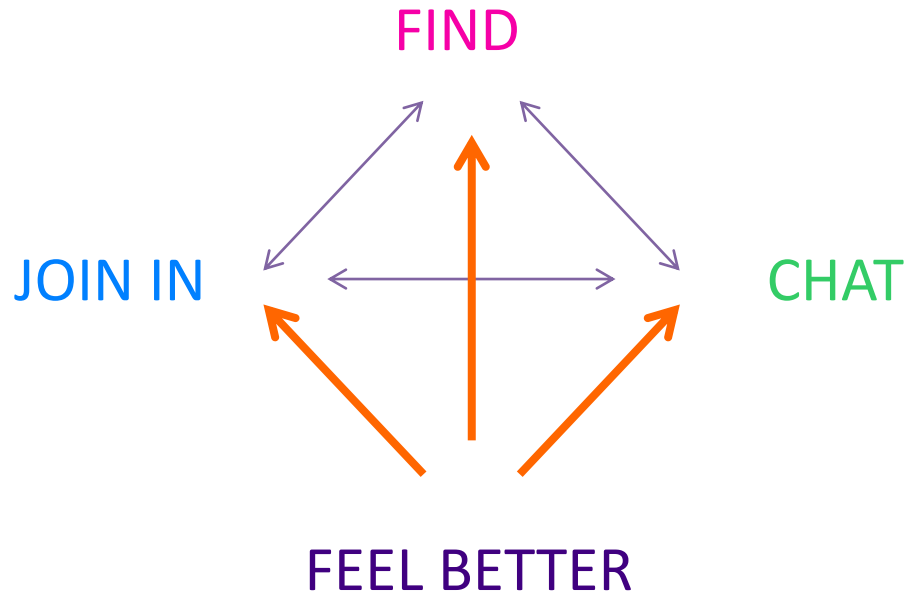
Support respite

## The importance of integration and connections



“It’s hard to imagine taking to a journey to a park just go for a walk or just to sit of a bench. There is no motivation in that. (...) I am eager to join a walking group or an activity, go with a friend”

Ramzy, in Sheffield for 7 years



People **FEEL BETTER** when they can **discover** and spend time in places that feel **relaxing and safe**, and where they can spend time **doing things that they enjoy**.

- Consider '**green-care / green prescribing**' alongside use of medication for refugees and asylum seekers. What training might be needed?
- **Nature and wellbeing** projects: consider how you can include refugee and asylum seeker participants.
- Set up a '**health + parks**' kit for refugee groups. Lend out frisbees, badminton sets, footballs, BBQ sets, picnic rugs, trainers, skateboards.
- **Who can help you** develop approaches which increase motivation and address barriers?
- Importance of **cross-sector working**... despite significant resource constraints everyone is supportive of refugee and asylum seeker wellbeing and inclusion.

## **Case Studies**

- Grounding, a therapeutic gardening scheme, an innovative partnership between South London and Maudsley NHS foundation trust (Slam), the Maudsley Charity and horticultural project Roots and Shoots.
- 'Wheels for Wellbeing': Cycling Club for refugees and asylum seekers (Manchester, collaboration Groundwork Trust, Refugee Action and CTC).



#refugeeswelcome  
*in parks*

[www.refugeeswelcomeinparks.com](http://www.refugeeswelcomeinparks.com)

Clare Rishbeth

University of Sheffield (also in IWUN project)

c.rishbeth@sheffield.ac.uk @clarerishbeth